

Mother of God Community
Sunday Night Prayer Meeting
October 9, 2016
Praise Brings Freedom and Fulfillment
Don James

Introduction – God is “Expressive”

God is love, and love cannot be contained – it moves outward to bless the one who is loved. God is all about the expression of love. It is what moved him to create the world. All of creation is an expression of God’s love. The sun, the moon, the stars... the mountains, the trees, the oceans, rivers and streams, all the beauty in the world was designed out of love. But these pale in comparison to the perfect expression of God’s love for us in Jesus. God became man, taking on flesh and blood, so that he could *express* his love most perfectly to all of creation. Jesus doesn’t just offer us forgiveness, he offers us his body and blood, soul and divinity, ... all that He is, because he loves us perfectly.

Love is most perfectly expressed when it has given everything. Love is not truly satisfied until it has given everything. This is how God created us, because he created us to experience the eternal joy and fulfillment that only perfect love can bring. This is why God’s first commandment to us is:

“Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength.” (Deuteronomy 6:5)

God doesn’t give this command because he needs our love, he gave us this command because **we need love** – not just to receive it, but to *give* it. Without love, we are unfulfilled, empty, always in search of something more to satisfy our restless hearts. We are most fulfilled when we *express* the love that God has poured into our hearts.

Why Praise?

So what does praise have to do with this? Often, when we think of our need for love, we think of receiving the love of another. But love isn’t concerned about receiving – *love is a giving of oneself*. Because of sin, it may take the love of another to draw out our own ability to love, but we are not truly fulfilled until we actually *express love*. We can love because God has already poured his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5)

How do we express love? We express what is in our hearts with *our bodies* – through the words we say and the actions we take. We can do many things to express love – but I want to speak particularly about praise.

Praise is an Expression of Love

Praise is an expression of love and respect. It’s *intent is to bless and raise up the one who is praised*. As such, it is an *indicator of the freedom we have to love*. It is a way that we show our affection for another. This is something that we can have trouble with having lived our lives in a fallen world. Our world is such a negative place that we can learn to avoid *wearing our heart on our sleeve*, to *keep our thoughts to ourselves*. Or, we may simply not be used to offering praise, it might not have been part of our life. Now, we have cell phones and other mobile devices that can come between people, making it even harder to show affection.

But we can grow in our ability to praise. I’m not one to use dramatic words – so when someone asks me how I’m doing, I always answer “okay”. I never say “great”, or “awesome”, or “horrible”. And that habit gets brought into other areas. For example, in the past, when my wife made dinner, she’d ask me what I thought of it. I’d answer, “it’s okay”. I can tell you that that is not the best response to give your wife! But I’ve improved – now when she asks, I say “... it’s good”. I still have room for improvement – I can learn from my daughter who says, “it’s delicious!”

This is kind of a silly example, but it **illustrates what is needed in praise – a little enthusiasm**. In other words, sometimes we need to put a little **energy and thought** into how we can thank and praise someone.

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When it comes to God, there is so much that we can say about him, and yet so little comes out of our mouths! Why is that? Look at any of the Psalms, there is so much that David expressed about God. And as mentioned earlier in the meeting, David had huge struggles with people hunting him down to kill him. Yet, he used praise as an anchor to hold him fast to God in the midst of his trials. Praise was a source of strength, hope, and intimacy with God.

I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, and He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God (Psalm 40:1-3)

*O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth, who have displayed your splendor above the heavens! ... When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained; What is man that you take thought of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet **you have made him a little lower than God, And You crown him with glory and majesty!** (Ps 8:1-5)*

We were created to express the glory of God who dwells within us! That is an amazing and powerful thing! So when we praise God, we are not just expressing thanks to God – we should see it as the glory of God within us seeking to be manifest through our praise.

Things that prevent us from praising: *habits, personality, ignorance, sin...*

My witness: In my case, I never really grew up showing a lot of affection. I did what I had to do, I was a fairly good kid, I helped others, but I never really got “outside of myself” to praise or honor others. I was shy and more of an introvert. When it came to God, when I saw my mother praising God and raising her hands, I thought it was strange, and I couldn’t see myself ever doing that. What would my friends think? But this is because **I was ignorant. I had no real relationship with God**, I had no real understanding of what I truly deserved or of the incredible gift God wanted to share with me – so **I had no way to appreciate it**. But when I did open my heart to God, he revealed to me that I was made for a *relationship with him*, but that I had turned away from him. And he showed me why he died for me, revealing his love and mercy to me, and so I gave my heart to him. Then his Spirit brought my spirit to life, and he put a new song in my heart. I couldn’t stop thanking and praising God. *The more I did, the more I loved him and the freer I was to express that love.*

The Woman at Simon’s House: One wonderful expression of love in scripture (**Luke 7**) is when Jesus was having dinner at Simon’s the Pharisee’s house and a woman broke in and wept at Jesus’ feet, kissing them and drying them with her tears and anointing them with perfume. This woman had so much freedom that she didn’t care what others thought, she had to express her love and gratitude to Jesus. Jesus said that **she loved much because she was forgiven much.**

This described me – before the Lord revealed to me my need for him and how much he loved me, I had no clue. I had no way to appreciate Him or what he saved me from. **The more we understand the depths of what we’ve been forgiven for, the freer we will be to love.** We should always ask God to help us understand and appreciate the greatness of his forgiveness and mercy and the significance of the life he calls us to so.

The Power of Praise

So there was *power* in that praise. **Power to break my bondage to fear. Power to let love out.** The more I praised God, the more I loved and delighted in God. I started to share God with my friends. I went to prayer meetings with my parents, and I started raising my hands – because I wanted to be as close as possible to my Father in heaven – I was reaching for him. The life of God within us wants to break free, to the point where we have no resistance to letting his love be expressed through our words and actions.

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There is power when we move beyond the realm of our thoughts and express them through our bodies. When the Israelites came against Jericho, God had them march around the city in procession with the ark of the covenant, blowing trumpets for 7 days. On the 7th day, they were to march around 7 times, and on the 7th time, they were to give a great shout. They did so and the walls came tumbling down.

Why did God ask them to do this? Surely he could have simply pulled them down the first day, and without any cooperation from his people? Yet God called them to persevere in action, *he wanted them involved*, to participate in what he does. The number 7 is a sign of completeness – God created the world in 7 days. We are called to forgive people 70x7 times. God wants us *completely engaged* with Him and his work. The Israelites were called to **give a great shout – not a half-hearted** “go Lord, ... break the walls down”.

When we are **fully engaged** in praise, with all our being, walls are broken, enemies are defeated, and we rejoice in the victory and the intimacy of our God. This is an issue of our whole being, body and soul, acting in union with what is in our hearts.

Praise is a proclamation of faith, and as such, it ministers to our spirit. When we praise God, we are not only giving God what he is worthy of, we are also **preaching truth to our souls (about who God is and what he has done) and we are entering into that truth in faith with our whole being.** We face all kinds of challenges that can test our faith and sow doubts. There are times when we can feel distant from the Lord, and we might not feel like praising God – it can feel unnatural or even insincere when we don't feel close to the Lord. **But these are the very times we need to praise God.**

*Though the fig tree should not blossom and there be no fruit on the vines,
Though the yield of the olive should fail and the fields produce no food,
Though the flock should be cut off from the fold and there be no cattle in the stalls,*

Yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.

The Lord GOD is my strength,

And He has made my feet like hinds' feet, And makes me walk on my high places. (Habakkuk 3:17-19)

This determination to trust in the Lord, to call to mind and express who he is and what he has done for us, is what builds our faith and allows us to rejoice in the God of our salvation. We are often brought into situations that can be difficult – they could be large or small... we could simply be facing our own vices or the world around us could be falling apart. But these are all situations meant to build our faith and help us trust in God our savior.

Praise can revive our souls. Praise puts us in a right relationship with God, where we extol Him as God. I know there are times when I don't feel like praising God – when there can be things weighing me down. It can be hard to let go of these things, and for a time, when I'm fighting these distractions or even the lack of desire in my own heart, my praise may be half-hearted. It can take some effort to praise God. But *as I persevere in my choice and discipline my body, putting more energy and focus* into praising God and recalling what he's done and how much he loves me, my spirit is lifted and I can enter more freely into the presence of God.

Our bodies are a good indicator of what we are expressing. At prayer meeting, if I feel flat or distant, I can ask, “what is my body expressing”? That can give me the opportunity to take authority over myself and bring myself into praise where the love of God poured into my heart can thrive and be released. I think it is important for us to ask “what is my body expressing” if we want his light to shine forth from us.

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Conclusion

What I want to leave you with is the concept of “expression” and the freedom we have when we are *fully engaged in expressing our love for God*. God is an expressive God, because he is love. Called to be his children, we are called to be expressive as well; expressing love is what fulfills us. We cannot be expressive with our minds – we need to use our bodies. God wants anything that inhibits the expression of our love for Him to be broken off, because he wants us to be whole and to be free and fulfilled.

Praise unifies our whole being, body and soul, as we bring them into the presence of God and place our faith in the reality of the truths we are professing. I want to encourage everyone, if you are not already praising God daily in prayer, to do so. Praise is not just something we do once a week at prayer meeting, it is a lifestyle, something we are called into for all eternity.

Possible Questions for reflection or for discussion in small groups:

1. Do you praise God on a daily basis, in prayer and/or during the day?
2. Do you find it difficult to praise God? If so, what do you think inhibits you?
3. Knowing that our bodies are meant to express the love and glory of God, do you see how we can look at our bodies as a way to examine what is going on in our spirit? How can you use your body more effectively to express love for God in prayer?